

Mark Krupnick

Leading cultural critic renowned for his studies of the creative life of American Jews

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Mark Krupnick, who has died aged 63, was a leading cultural critic and interpreter of the creative life of American Jews. His career was closely tied to the fading reputation of the New York intellectuals, from Lionel Trilling to Susan Sontag, whose sharp-edged essays and cultural combativeness brought a new style of intellectual life to American culture.

Krupnick's best-known book, *Lionel Trilling And The Fate Of Cultural Criticism* (1986), captured with surgical precision the profound ambivalence in Trilling's mode of cultural criticism. Trilling's reputation had begun to fade by the 1980s, though, for Jewish intellectuals of Krupnick's generation, settling with his legacy was a powerful imperative. Krupnick's book, an intellectual obituary of a high order, showed why Trilling had mattered, and why he no longer did so. He also edited a collection of essays on the theorist du jour, Jacques Derrida.

Krupnick's parents were Yiddish-speaking immigrants, who lived in a largely immigrant community in Irvington, New Jersey. They knew nothing about the life of the mind in their adopted land; Manhattan, across the Hudson river, could have been on the other side of the moon. The complex provincialisms of the New York intellectuals, and their argumentative politics, interested Krupnick less, perhaps, than the powerful ways they read literary texts. For some of us, he wrote, "reading texts may be more than a cognitive activity. It is nothing less than a way of being in the world."

As a young man, Krupnick was sent to Newark Academy, "a dingy day school, where I spent, miserably, ages 13-17". He went on to Harvard University to read English, and, taking a break from its oppressive earnestness, lived for two years in Greenwich Village, handicapping horses on the sports desk of the *New York Post*. In the evenings, he was a regular at the Cedar Street Tavern, the favourite bar of the younger abstract expressionists.

Krupnick graduated from Harvard in 1962 with the highest academic honours, and continued his graduate work at Brandeis University, Massachusetts. A Fulbright scholar at Darwin College, Cambridge, in 1965-66, he taught at Smith College, Massachusetts, in 1966, and then moved on to Boston University for five years.

Boston, in the 1970s, was a cauldron of social protest, generational struggle and ethnic aggression. The university English department, with heavy-hitters like Helen Vendler on the faculty, was a blasted terrain of ill-will between traditionalists and young radicals.

In 1969, Krupnick joined the staff of *Modern Occasions*, a quarterly review founded by Philip Rahv after he broke with his former colleagues on the *Partisan Review*. Krupnick admired Rahv's essays, which are now largely unread. But it was the malicious reality of the man, then in his early 60s, which was an education in the ways of power and disaffection.

Rahv hated the counter-culture, from its music to its libertine sexual freedoms, and used *Modern Occasions* to attack over-inflated reputations, cultural backsliders and hippies. "I was continually being pushed," Krupnick wrote, "to perform demolition jobs on new books of literary criticism, but it was demoralising to be used as an extension of another man's anger, the hammer in his hand."

Krupnick came back to England in 1972 to study at Anna Freud's child therapy centre in Hampstead, north London, and was a visiting lecturer in American studies at Keele University. On his return to America in 1974, he became a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee.

He emerged from the culture wars a saner and happier man when he met Jean Carney, a beautiful journalist working in Milwaukee who wanted to study human development at the University of Chicago. After their marriage, and the birth of their son Joe, they moved to Chicago in 1979. Krupnick made the long commute by public transportation from Chicago to Milwaukee for eight years, while his wife completed her doctorate.

He took a professorship at the University of Illinois in Chicago in 1987 and, in 1990, became a professor at the divinity school of the University of Chicago, where he taught in the religion and literature programme. This job marked the happiest time of his life: he had a lively, handsome son, a profoundly happy marriage, and the chance to work in a stimulating, collegial environment.

Then, "on the day after Thanksgiving in 2000," he wrote, "I was rushed to the emergency room of the University of Chicago hospital." At first, the symptoms suggested a stroke. A diagnosis of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) soon followed. Known in America as Lou Gehrig's disease, this condition is characterised by a progressive degeneration of the motor cells in the brain and spinal cord. It is irreversible and invariably fatal.

The kind of ALS which Krupnick had was progressive bulbar palsy, which soon deprived him of the ability to speak or swallow. His wife, by then an expert in the clinical treatment of attention deficit disorder, spoke his grateful words when he took early retirement from the divinity school.

In that address, Krupnick wrote with honesty and directness - and anger, too - about the disease, and his impending death. In a culture which preferred death to come wreathed in euphemisms and soft-focus acceptance, he wrote with a prose stripped bare of indirections. To me, he wrote, "E, my use of my hands is dwindling; so I must conclude soon." He had been making final revisions to a manuscript of his essays on Jewish-American writers.

Jean and Joe survive him.

• Mark Krupnick, critic and cultural historian, born April 18 1939; died March 29 2003

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